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# Germ warfare: Is the Kremlin tearing up the rules book?

By WILLIAM BEECHER

WASHINGTON — If reports are true that the Soviet Union is employing poison gas in Afghanistan and is producing germ-warfare agents — both contrary to treaty obligations — the implication is staggering.

—It could undermine confidence in the value of a wide sweep of arms control efforts with the Russians.

—It would call for a searching reappraisal of the defensive plans for Western Europe.

—It would raise deeply troubling questions about whether the Kremlin is becoming contemptuous of the reaction to activities condemned as barbarous by most of the civilized world.

Right off, it should be underscored that the evidence is not unambiguous.

First a trickle and most recently a flood of reports have come from Afghan tribesmen, fleeing to safety in Pakistan, of the use against their villages of a bluish gray gas that caused violent retching and, in some cases, death. During the current Soviet spring offensive to wrest control from the rebels of Kunar Valley, on the Pakistan border, such reports have proliferated.

Might the agent, dispensed from low-flying aircraft, be some form of potent tear gas designed to flush rebel marksmen from their huts where they could be attacked with bombs, bullets and napalm? A person with a severe respiratory problem or weak heart might be killed by such a "nonlethal" agent. Anyway, the reports were sketchy and emotional, coming primarily from illiterate tribesmen.

Analysts noted that while Soviet units throughout Afghanistan have their normal chemical warfare and decontamination units, this could be explained as reflecting a decision to deploy units intact, rather than leave some elements back home.

But one recent report came from a relatively expert witness, a defecting Afghan army colonel who is well schooled on the properties of lethal

chemical agents and their effects. He believes he observed a nerve gas attack.

Since the United States now has what it regards as convincing evidence that Vietnamese forces in Laos and Cambodia used Russian-supplied stocks of nerve and mustard gas, some analysts are prepared to believe the Soviets are using poison gas in Afghanistan.

"Why not?" asked one official. "They're using napalm to torch whole villages. They know that if this war drags on it can only bring them grief, with the Moslem world, with the Americans, with everyone. Better to smash resistance as fast as possible. Then there will be only the silence of the grave."

So the United States has decided to try to secure convincing evidence. If it succeeds, it could go before the United Nations to condemn the Soviet Union. Technically, the Russians could use gas in Afghanistan because that country is not a signatory to the 1925 Geneva protocol against gas warfare. But that's a quibble. How would Western Europe, which remembers well the use of gas in World War I, react? And how about the Moslem world, contemplating this kind of gruesome war on its co-religionists?

The other report comes from Russian emigres who have persuasively confirmed rumors of the deaths of hundreds of people in Sverdlovsk following the explosion last spring at what is described as a biological warfare manufacturing plant. American intelligence is convinced that deadly pulmonary anthrax spores were spewed into the atmosphere.

In 1972 the Russians signed a convention banning the development, production, stockpiling or acquisition of lethal germs or toxins, except in small laboratory quantities for medical research. The convention went into effect in 1975, at which time the Soviet Union formally declared it "does not possess any" such weapons.

But at roughly the time of that declaration, US intelligence came up with photographic and other

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evidence suggesting the Russians might be constructing or expanding bacteriological warfare plants at Zagorsk, Omutninsk and Sverdlovsk. They pointed to the high incinerator stacks and large cold-storage bunkers normally associated with such special production.

If confronted, the Russians might, of course, have insisted the plants were simply for pharmaceutical manufacture. But some officials urged the Administration to approach the Russians and ask for on-site inspection — by a neutral panel of experts, if necessary — lest an absence of challenge let the Soviets think they could get away with stockpiling germ weapons.

But the Administration, at that time, felt the evidence was unclear and the danger of bruising detente too great. Now, however, after Afghanistan and after the Sverdlovsk incident, the US is demanding an explanation from the Russians.

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